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SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S FOREIGN MINISTER CRITICIZES DIPLOMATS
ON ELECAM

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[1](#)B. YAOUNDE 87

[1](#)1. (U) On February 19, Cameroonian Foreign Minister Henri Eyebe Ayissi summoned the diplomatic corps to the Foreign Ministry to present the government's views on the newly established Electoral Commission (Elections Cameroon - ELECAM). He detailed reasons why the international community should believe that ELECAM (heavily criticized for being filled with ruling party stalwarts) can be independent and he urged foreign partners to support the organization or at least show "self discipline" in not criticizing it. He warned against international efforts to broker power-sharing arrangements and urged understanding of the African cultural and political context of what he saw as a major step forward in Cameroon's democracy. The initial local media reaction has been overwhelmingly critical of Ayissi's event, depicting it as an insult to the diplomatic community. End summary.

Background -----

[1](#)2. (U) ELECAM was sworn in on January 29 amidst significant controversy and widespread public distrust. The U.S. and several other significant western Ambassadors did not attend the swearing in ceremony and post made it clear to the media and senior government officials that this was a conscious decision reflecting our dissatisfaction with ELECAM's partisan composition (ten out of twelve members are stalwarts of the ruling CPDM party) and its apparent lack of credibility among many Cameroonians. Ambassador subsequently reiterated these points on February 16 in a high visibility interview on government-run CRTV.

[1](#)3. (U) On The European Union issued a statement deploring the partisan nature of ELECAM membership and urging ELECAM to prove it can be independent and impartial. The UK High Commissioner, returning from a long absence, also recently criticized ELECAM's membership, saying the UK would not support the institution until it shows its ability to act with independence. The new Dutch Ambassador also publicly criticized ELECAM in the past week, while EU contacts have told us informally that the EU is freezing anticipated funding for ELECAM.

Foreign Minister Pleads for Support -----

[1](#)4. (U) In his February 19 speech, Ayissi affirmed that the creation of ELECAM was a historic step "on the path to improving our electoral system," combining responsibility for organizing elections with a charge to assure the "impartiality, objectivity, and transparency" required under law. (Note: all quotes are informal translations drawn from the French text. The Ministry reportedly does not yet have an official English version of the speech. End note.) The January 23 rejection by the Supreme Court of a protest from the main opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) party means

that "the debate on this subject can be considered definitively closed".

15. (U) Ayissi stressed that ELECAM members had resigned from the ruling CPDM party and sworn a solemn oath before the Supreme Court to be impartial, meeting the law's requirement that ELECAM members not be members of a party. ELECAM members must refrain from anything which would compromise their independence and dignity, he stated, and must not "seek or receive instructions or orders from any public or private authority." He further insisted that ELECAM members must work well together to make the organization function and affirmed that their independence was vouchsafed by the fact that they cannot be sanctioned or arrested for their opinions and, except if they commit certain kinds of crime, cannot be brought to court during their tenure. No authority, not even the President, can remove them from office, except for in exceptional cases of physical or mental incapacitation or if they have violated their oath. He affirmed the government's commitment to adequately fund and support ELECAM. Releasing final election results remains the prerogative of the Constitutional Council and judiciary, the Foreign Minister said.

16. (U) The Foreign Minister thanked the international community for supporting the process of creating ELECAM and appreciated that some diplomats were present at the swearing in ceremony for ELECAM members. He asked foreign missions to respect Cameroonian institutions and affirmed that President Paul Biya had committed "to create adequate conditions to assure the independence of ELECAM, in accordance with the spirit and letter of the law."

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17. (U) Ayissi requested that foreign partners take a "positive and reasonable" approach to ELECAM, either through tangible assistance (financial, material, logistical, technical) and/or through "exerting self-discipline" in not discrediting national institutions "because they do not conform to dominant political or cultural models" - what he termed "a new form of the civilizing mission (mission civilisatrice)". ELECAM is empowered to enter into foreign collaborations but needs to keep the government informed, he added.

18. (U) He urged foreign partners to respect the results of elections. Referencing other African experiences, he urged the international community to abstain from rejecting election results with the hope of negotiating a power sharing arrangement, under the supervision of foreign governments or international facilitators. This latter "apocalyptic" solution would amount to an unacceptable "partition of the state".

19. (U) The Foreign Minister concluded by underscoring the importance of trust, self-discipline, civic education, and "dialogue in the consolidation of our democratic culture". He quoted a number of African proverbs to stress the need for tolerance of different ways and speeds toward common goals, keeping in mind the historical and cultural contexts of African states.

Media Reaction -----

110. (U) The local media was at the event in large numbers and gave it wide coverage in the February 20 press. The independent press overwhelmingly depicted the event as an insult to the diplomatic corps, which had to stand in a hallway during the hour-long speech, with no opportunity for dialogue. Some press stories noted that diplomats did not want their pictures taken with the Foreign Minister, with some Ambassadors leaving early or looking dismayed. The media criticized the Foreign Minister's lecturing tone and speculated that much of the dip corps was annoyed. Some

papers hoped the diplomats would respond formally. One paper reflected on the irony of Ayissi urging the international community to refrain from criticism while asking for their money. The government-owned Cameroon Tribune, not surprisingly, proclaimed that the Foreign Minister had "reassured" the diplomatic corps about ELECAM and Cameroon's democratic path.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Ayissi visibly seemed to want to win over diplomats with this speech and he couched the event in the context of a New Year's greeting. However, the staging of the event undermined the message. We expected the Foreign Minister to react strongly to criticisms of ELECAM (he has lectured individual Ambassadors in the past on several occasions about not meddling in internal affairs). As the media pointed out, though, the format of the event alone - summoning the entire dip corps (including many who had not spoken out about ELECAM), having them stand for an hour in a hall while the Minister delivered a 14-page speech in French (with no English translation on hand), in front of a bevy of media -- left many in the audience (including our Ambassador) angry and annoyed. Several European Ambassadors had health problems and found the event physically taxing.

¶12. (SBU) Delivery and staging aside, the message was well structured and reasoned but largely unconvincing. Despite Ayissi's arguments, President Biya retains wide scope to change or manipulate the law or institutions to get his way with ELECAM. The Foreign Minister's remarks rejecting some kind of internationally brokered power-sharing were particularly bizarre and may reflect a real concern about the international legitimacy of future elections and the implications for domestic stability.

¶13. (SBU) It is not at all clear how much Ayissi was acting on his own and how much (and from who) he was taking orders, both on the format and the substance of the event. It is clearer, though, that our and other international criticism has gotten the government's attention and that the overwhelmingly negative press coverage will further weaken the government's cause. One positive outcome of the speech is that Ayissi has put the GRC on record committing to make ELECAM work effectively and independently, with an adequate budget and needed government support -- which the international community can use as leverage as we observe

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ELECAM take shape.

GARVEY